

Agenda Item No:

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 30th June 2022

Report Title: Customer Service, IT & Digital Strategy

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Summary: This updated strategy sets out our vision for putting the customer at the centre of the services we provide. It explains how we will develop our services digitally and inspire confidence in our digital services making them accessible to all and enabling us to deliver outstanding customer services.

The high level digital strategy brochure will be available to view and download on our website in accessible formats

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: N/A

Recommendations: Cabinet is recommended to:-

- I. **Approve and adopt the attached Customer Service, IT & Digital Strategy.**

Policy Overview:

Financial Implications: Any projects requiring funding will be requested via the PID process on a case by case basis.

Legal Implications: None

Equalities Impact See Attached

Assessment:

**Data Protection
Impact
Assessment:**

It will be necessary to undertake a data protection impact assessment on any new system so that it is able to comply with this important legislation.

**Risk Assessment
(Risk Appetite
Statement):**

The project management group will monitor progress, risks and issues for specific projects related to this strategy as well as the overarching risk of cyber security to ensure that any risks to delivery are identified and unblocked. The cyber security risk is also monitored by the Audit Committee.

There is a reputational risk if we do not move forward digitally so we will not be able to keep up with customer expectations.

Delivery of the digital strategy sits within our strategic risk appetite.

**Sustainability
Implications:**

None

**Other Material
Implications:**

None

**Exempt from
Publication:**

NO

**Background
Papers:**

None

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Report Title: Customer Service, IT & Digital Strategy

Introduction and Background

1. This report has come via the IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee who are charged with making recommendations to Cabinet in order to support digital transition and technical advances that promote more effective service delivery.
2. At the meeting on 29 March 2022 the IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee, gave support for the strategy and recommend to Cabinet that the strategy be adopted.
3. Ashford's first digital strategy was adopted in 2017 and aimed to improve online services and make the way we worked more efficient. The previous digital strategy had an ambitious action plan that has helped to refocus the whole organisation on how we can deliver our services more efficiently and provide better choice for our residents using digital tools.

A number of projects of particular note have been:

- i. Our Website (Ashford.gov.uk) has been re-designed to ensure that our website users have easier journeys and can find what they are looking for easily; the redesign adhered to new accessibility standards meaning that, for example, our residents who are visually impaired or who do not have English as their first language can also access information and services.
- ii. We have increased the range of transactions that are available online to improve the access to our services and we have a suite of website data that helps us to continuously improve the information and services we provide via the website.
- iii. A new customer service system has been rolled out that supports improved online services, and helps keep residents updated with progress to reassure them that their request is being dealt with. The system has also streamlined back office processes so staff can spend more time dealing with residents, in addition it has supported better mobile and remote working reducing the need for staff to travel back to the office to update systems.
- iv. Internally we have standardised our desktop environment, migrated to Microsoft 365 and rolled out standard hardware. This has helped our IT department to be able to quickly respond and resolve issues that might stop systems and staff working. Most of our telephony had migrated to Skype by 2019. As a result we were able to respond swiftly when mandated to work from home during the pandemic as Microsoft Teams had already started to be deployed onto desktops and staff were not tied to desk phones due to the migration to Skype.

- v. We also adopted a set of design principles that now help to shape how we reconfigure our services to make them more efficient whilst ensuring we keep the customer at the centre of the service design. These principles will remain a key aspect of our future approach to service design; with a new planning system, regulatory services system and new waste and recycling contract in the pipeline it will be essential to design the services that meet the needs of residents making their experience of dealing with us a simple and good one.

4. The below graph shows our website visits versus the more traditional contact methods (face to face/telephone/email) in the four years that we have implemented the digital strategy. In that time we have had 8,925,252 page views on the website.



5. Since the last digital strategy we have seen that the way that customers transact with us is changing. Since 2018 we have seen a 45% increase website users.
6. Over the same period of time we have seen an 81.9% reduction in face to face visitors, this is partly due to the effect Covid-19 had on us being able deliver face to face services however we have not seen the same levels as pre pandemic requiring face to face services.
7. Phone calls have remained at a similar level however we have seen an increase in the calls handled at first point in 2021 as we have been able direct resources to where volumes have dictated due to the increased use of our website and reduced face to face.
8. Over the four years we have seen 1,965,907 website users. If customer services dealt with the same amount of people the cost would be £1,120,566.99 which shows the value that digital transformation brings to us. On the same point these costs do not include any time where the back office staff would get involved in the process so this figure would be considerably higher.
9. The updated Digital Strategy underpins the core principles of the corporate plan to:
 - Understand and respond to the needs of our communities to ensure no one is disadvantaged.
 - Put our residents at the heart of everything we do and ensure our services are accessible.

It sets out our approach in putting technology at the forefront of our journey to put the customers, residents and local businesses at the centre of the services we provide. It explains how we will develop and inspire confidence in our digital services making them accessible to all and enabling us to deliver outstanding customer services.

10. Since our last strategy was developed COVID-19 has been a major disruptor that has forced the whole organisation to change its approach to service delivery. Covid has also changed the way that that people transact with the organisations they deal with. More people are accessing services online so we need to make sure that our services are simple, easy to use and have the customer at the heart. To do this we will continue to redesign our services by embracing digital tools that enhance the customer experience. This will allow us to make sure we have the resources to help those who cannot use digital tools and need support in a different way.
11. The strategy explains how we intend to develop and support our Information Technology based software solutions and applications to help deliver and achieve the organisation's Corporate Plan and Digital Transformation Programme.
12. It also helps to guide decisions about how systems are designed, technologies used, services delivered. The delivery of the strategy will continue to have good monitoring and oversight by a number of groups, such as the IT & Digital Advisory Committee, Programme Management Group, Commercial & Digital Board and the Core Digital Team to ensure delivery is sustained.

Proposal

What we aim to achieve

13. We will continue redesigning our processes putting the residents first to provide a better experience when interacting with the council no matter how they want to interact with us and improving the choice of ways our residents can contact us. People will be able to get what they need from us in a simple and easy to use way.
14. We will work with our partners across all sectors to bridge the digital skills gap and provide alternatives to those residents who cannot transact with us online. There will be a focus on areas where digital poverty acts as a barrier for residents. Work with national and local partners on cross functional projects to reach more residents and strengthen the technology we use and services that we provide.
15. Services have been leading on service based projects working to improve processes as well as introducing new systems. The digital team will continue to support services in their digital journey to ensure a customer first approach making sure that the corporate approach to this strategy is followed.
16. We aim to improve our understanding of our residents, using joined-up data that will allow us to better design services around the needs of our residents, drive efficiencies and digital transformation, increasing our transparency and public accountability. This will support us in making better decisions for our residents.

17. We would like to have a happy and more efficient workforce who are equipped with all the technology they need to do their jobs safely and efficiently whether that be in the office, on site or when working remotely. Some of the work that they currently do will be delivered digitally which will mean staff are able to focus on higher-value tasks.

18. We will build on our modern, secure and integrated solutions infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other that will simplify things for residents, ensuring staff are able to see the relevant information that they need.

How will we achieve this?

19. Our goal is to use the most suitable technology to provide easy to use digital services improving the service to all of our residents no matter how they want to transact with us. We will achieve this through five strands of work:

Strand	Theme
1	Residents & Local Businesses first
2	Collaborate with partner groups to improve digital skills and inclusion
3	Make better use of data
4	Give staff the tools and skills needed to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently
5	Create a modern, secure and integrated solutions and infrastructure

20. To assist our approach in delivering the strands we will use our digital design principles to guide all of our work which are:

Do the hard work, test and learn to keep it simple

We need to regularly review our process – just because we have done it for years doesn't mean it's the best way. Working in an agile way where feedback on processes is actioned. Residents should have a single point of contact. It's ok to make mistakes, as long as we learn from them and share our experiences.

Focus on the customer journey, making it quick and uncomplicated to empower residents to do more for themselves

We need to use data to inform the construction of the customer journey. Aligns with corporate values of Ambitious, Trustworthy and Creative. We must balance our digital persona with also being seen as human beings.

Focus on the goals and delivery

We need to know the purpose of what we're hoping to achieve. There should be a clear path of how we will do this set out at the start of a project.

Less is more

We need to work efficiently and smartly. Less is more. If something works we should look to reuse it elsewhere in the organisation.

Distinctive

We should be seen by others as trailblazing and distinctive developing new and innovative services using open source so that we can share. Thinking outside of the box and be risk aware, not risk averse. Ask yourself: “How can you make this process more distinctive as an ABC service?” We should dare to innovate, whether that is using new ways of working or existing solutions.

Seamless approach

We will put the customer at the heart of what we do. We'll provide easy to use digital services that collect information only once. We need to be consistent across council systems to provide resilience.

Who needs this information?

When designing content or a process we should always be asking ourselves this question. We need to have an understanding of the customer's needs and should only collect the information we need. This information should only be collected once, at the first point of contact.

Tell residents what to expect and keep them up to date along the way

We must manage the expectations of our residents. They should be able to track the progress of their transactions/applications. We need to clearly communicate when they can expect to hear back from us and what else we may need. We should constantly seek feedback from our residents to continually improve services.

This is for everyone

Consider the ability of those using our services and create content/processes that can be completed by anyone. Ensure services and customer journeys are accessible. Write in plain English, use heading styles, explain acronyms, use alt text and cater for users who have English as a second language.

Strand 1 – Residents & Local Businesses first

21. More people are going online to access services, and the residents of Ashford are no different to the wider population. Our residents and local businesses are our customers and they expect simple to use services online that are available on any device that they use. According to our recent digital consultation 51.9% of respondents accessed council services via a smart phone or tablet, 26.6% via a desktop computer and 21.5% used a laptop.
22. In 2021 we had 660,079 users on the Ashford Borough Council website, while the contact centre handled 118,049 enquiries via phone, email, web chat & face to face enquiries. We have a range of online services available for people to self-serve 24/7, from quite simple contact forms through to complex end to end services like reporting a missed bin that automates as much as possible to provide a seamless and quicker resolution to our residents.
23. The council's digital uptake (the percentage of people transacting with the council online in relation to other channels) was 83.4% in 2021. Our residents want to be able to go online to report, apply and pay easily and be able to track what they have reported to the resolution of the process, receiving updates along the way. We will continue to develop our range of services available online to provide even better choice and access 24/7.

24. By making more services available online we are able to dedicate more staff time to help with more complex enquiries and support residents who cannot use online channels.
25. We want to understand what our residents need and to give them the opportunity to provide feedback on online services so we are able to improve their experience. Our website has a feedback button that has allowed us to work in an agile way to make changes quickly helping us to improve our website in real time.
26. During the consultation on digital services 90.6% of respondents wanted to view all of their council transactions in one place so we will look to pull this information into one portal with strong authentication. Providing Information like 'what is in my area' with bin day collections, polling stations, planning applications or schools/drs in the area.
27. 61.8% of respondents indicated that they visit www.ashford.gov.uk 1–2 times a year and 85.3% of respondents have visited within the last 3-6 months. This aligns with the Government Digital Services indication that some people only need to access services a few times per year, however some residents need a lot of help, sometimes for a few months, and sometimes for years. We need to make sure we cater for all of these people.

71% of respondents found our website easy to use (rating it between 6 -10 out of 10). If residents can navigate our website well they can find the information that they need any time of the day and without having to contact us.
28. www.ashford.gov.uk is a trusted source of information and we need to ensure our residents trust our online presence, relying on consistent design and content to know they are interacting with us and only us whether that be via our website or social media channels. We will also share any known scams via our social media channels. We will work to use trusted systems/sources such as .Gov products such as Notify & Verify to help to build confidence in our online services.
29. Residents have many preferences on how they contact us or can be contacted whether it be via text/WhatsApp/website/email/phone or face to face. Over the period of the next digital strategy we will work to facilitate different channels so no one is left behind and it is convenient for everyone.
30. We will do the basics right to ensure officers are contactable and use technology such as out of office messages and up to date voicemail to direct customers to an alternative colleague if officers are not available.
31. We will ensure that our staff have correct equipment to help residents that have an impairment but are not categorised with a disability and enable them to transact with us via traditional methods.

Strand 1 – Residents & Businesses First

No.	What we will do	Who	Budget required	When
1	Build a customer portal that gives residents information all in one place	Digital Team	£30,000	2022/23
2	Improve online services to enable our customer service team to focus on supporting the digitally excluded and particularly vulnerable residents.	Digital Team	N/A	Ongoing
3	Carry out user research and receive continuous feedback from residents and local businesses to understand what they need from us and create a roadmap and continue to make sure our website is clear and easy to use	Digital Team	N/A	Ongoing
4	Build any new digital services with the resident at the centre focusing on quick and easy transactions that gives a good experience.	Digital Team/All Services	N/A	Ongoing
5	Utilise social media and emerging communications channels (such as Nextdoor) to reach out to the community and engage with them on the channels they choose to communicate with us on.	Communications Team	N/A	Ongoing
6	Enhance our channels for customer services, increasing chat and investigating platforms such as WhatsApp and .Gov notify	Digital Team	£20,000	2022/23
7	Use data analytics to identify trends/failed search terms and optimise our website content by improving keywords, page titles and descriptions ensuring that the design and content is consistent.	Digital Team	N/A	Ongoing

Strand 2 - Collaborate with partner groups to improve digital skills and inclusion

32. Digital platforms are generally the default option for accessing public services, information, entertainment and each other. Those who are offline and not capable of using the internet risk missing the benefits that the internet can offer.
33. Digital inclusion is about making sure that people have the capability to use the internet to do things that benefit them day to day - whether they be individuals or businesses.
34. In the Government Digital Service Digital Inclusion Strategy 'digital inclusion' is defined as:
- Digital skills - being able to use computers and the internet. This is important, but a lack of digital skills is not necessarily the only, or the biggest, barrier people face.
 - Connectivity - and access to the internet. People need the right infrastructure but that is only the start.
 - Accessibility - services should be designed to meet all users' needs, including those dependent on assistive technology to access digital services. Accessibility is a barrier for many people, but digital inclusion is broader.
35. Each of these definitions addresses a single specific barrier that some, but not all, people and organisations face. There is seldom just one reason why people are digitally excluded. According to the Digital Poverty Alliance 25% of vulnerable children do not have access to a suitable device for learning and 70% of households earning less than £17.5K only have foundation digital skills.
36. Most people will need to interact with a digital system, such as an online job application, even if they don't have the skills to do so. Digitally excluded people can lack skills, confidence, and motivation, along with having limited or no access to equipment and connectivity.
37. A core theme of the corporate plan is for us to be a caring borough. At the council we have consistently worked to develop ways to support people who lack the confidence, or desire, to transact with us digitally. Being able to help our residents is key to everything we do, where they cannot access our services online we offer assisted digital help, telephone appointments as well as face to face services. We will continue to provide off line alternatives so we can prevent people in our community from being digitally excluded from accessing our services.
38. Our COVID-19 response highlighted the need to be available to everyone and we relied on our digital channels to keep people up to date leaving our traditional channels free for those who couldn't transact with us digitally. In the wider world people who had not previously used technology did so to keep in contact with their friends and families, order grocery deliveries and seek advice and guidance.

39. Kent County Council's Digital Inclusion & Capabilities Team are working on various projects and we will work with them as well as existing groups and charities to put digital enablement and skills out there where people can find them more easily helping more of our residents to use online services. One of these projects is undertaking feasibility studies to create free WI-FI for deprived areas of the borough, we will work with KCC to identify areas and work collaboratively to help implement solutions where possible.
40. The website accessibility regulations came into force for public sector bodies on 23 September 2018. Around that time we started planning and designing a new website, which went live in August 2020. We took an accessibility-first approach to the design of the new website, ensuring that it would be as accessible as possible for all of our residents. In order to do this we use a mixture of automated and manual testing, using a website reporting tool to identify any accessibility issues. New developments for the website are tested using this tool before they are deployed to the live website.
41. We have also conducted user testing with partners as well as conducting manual audits of our web estate using assistive technologies.
42. The website accessibility monitoring team at the Central Digital & Data Office, which is part of the Cabinet Office) audit all government websites. In November 2021, their audit flagged four technical issues with our website, which we fixed within the 12 week grace period afforded by the Central Digital & Data Office (CD&DO). We also updated our website's accessibility statement to match an updated template provided by the Government Digital Service. Given the scope and size of our website it was reassuring that only four matters were highlighted by the CD&DO and this gives us confidence that our systems and processes for monitoring our website accessibility are sound.
43. With around a quarter of the UK population having some type of disability, accessibility is a key focus on our website development roadmap as we do not want to exclude any of our users. Regular monitoring of our website's accessibility is ensuring that we remain compliant with this important regulation.
44. COVID-19 highlighted the part that technology plays in the community in particular engagement. Using hybrid meeting technology to encourage greater engagement with our communities enabled more of our residents to participate in local democracy; and whilst the government has not agreed that hybrid meetings can form part of the formal machinery of local democracy we will continue to develop our approach in order to take advantage of wider engagement and also improvements to our carbon footprint.
45. Ashford Borough Council has been pro-actively supporting the rollout of superfast broadband across the borough for many years and is recognised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as one of the best case studies of Local Authorities taking the lead on broadband improvement. The major development in this sector has been ABC's inclusion of promotion of fibre to the premises in its Local Plan, which requires nearly all new developments in the borough to provide fibre broadband connections to the premises.
46. Following guidance from DCMS aimed at supporting Local Authorities to provide leadership we have established a cross-departmental digital enabler group. This

ensures the council has clear and pro-active processes across departments that allow providers to engage and invest easily and with more confidence.

47. While broadband has been the principle focus of this work to date, there are other aspects of digital connectivity which will require action in order to deliver a fully improved digital borough. Mobile coverage in parts of the borough is known to be an issue, and coverage is part of the essential digital infrastructure needed by our residents especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. The Economic Development team have met with Mobile UK, the trade association for Mobile Network Operators in the UK to understand how the council can support investment in the borough. Mobile UK is coordinating the Shared Rural Network which will see the main operators improve their mobile capability to reach more premises in hard-to-reach areas.

Strand 2 - Collaborate with partner groups to improve digital skills and inclusion

No.	What we will do	Who	Budget required	When
1	Feasibility around Community Wi-Fi projects	Digital Team/IT	TBC	2022/23
2	Work with KCC and partners on projects to help develop skills and trust	Digital Team	N/A	2022/25
3	Use our social media to highlight scams, good practice and credible sources of information	Communications Team	N/A	Ongoing
4	Proactively monitor and take action to ensure our website continues to have good accessibility standards	Digital Team	N/A	Ongoing
5	Continue to work with broadband providers to support improved connections and increase investment	Economic Development	N/A	Ongoing
6	Continue the coordination of the Ashford urban area FTTP rollout and ensure other planned rollouts are continuing at pace	Economic Development	N/A	Ongoing
7	Take a leading role in coordinating and promoting programmes such as the Gigabit voucher schemes and community fibre partnerships	Economic Development	N/A	Ongoing
8	Proactively engage with Mobile Network Operators and Mobile UK to progress the Shared Rural Network and improve mobile connectivity in the Borough	Economic Development	N/A	Ongoing

Strand 3 - Make better use of data

48. Data is a key asset enabling us, as a council to deliver improving services to our residents. This means services can be targeted, and designed using our data, helping to transforming our services and improve outcomes. This will help us to identify and quantify savings and efficiencies that help support our medium term financial plan.
49. To benefit, sound data governance and robust data protection compliance is vital. Clear frameworks and practices must always be in place ensuring our data can be used as a consistent, trusted, and accountable asset. Making sure that we use data in a way that is legal, ethical, and responsible, so our residents can have trust and confidence in how we are handling their data.
50. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the innovative use of data, with a range of data-driven interventions launched or repurposed during the pandemic, providing invaluable assistance to our residents at a time of acute need. Whilst the vital public interest, legal basis for processing has now passed, we must not lose sight of the power that deploying our existing datasets in differing ways had in furthering and increasingly tailoring our services to the needs of our residents.
51. With Information and data being crucial to every part of the council's business. Managing and using it correctly, making sure it's secure and making it available helps us to identify areas to focus on and deliver improved services. We will continue to ensure that the Information Governance Group are consulted throughout data driven projects to provide assurance that we are using it in a compliant way.
52. A key objective when building our website was to better understand the needs and behaviour of our residents. To do this we have built a reporting dashboard which pulls in data relating to our website, call centre, social media channels and other third-party digital systems that are part of various customer journeys.
53. To complement this we are developing a borough profile drawing on publically available data sources, the resident survey and segmentation tools. This helps us to understand our residents and communities to ensure we are directing our resources in the most efficient way.
54. The census results will be made available during 2022 which will provide a rich data source. We will need to update our records with the new data and ensure we are making the best use of this information.
55. Having all of this information in one place enables us to see the bigger picture of how our residents are interacting with us across multiple channels. We can easily identify aspects of our website that are working well and apply the approaches that are working there to under-performing pages.
56. We already benefit from technology to tag our website so that we can analyse how users are interacting with webpages, giving us a better understanding of how successful new developments and integrations to our website are.

57. We also monitor search terms so we can ensure our residents can find what they are looking for no matter how they search for it as well as enabling us to communicate with our residents using the same terms that they are accustomed to using. Also by reviewing our website visits and call centre data we can predict times of the year when we expect to be even busier, allowing us to put measures in place to deal with increased demand.
58. With clear outcomes, as a result we will be able to better design services around the needs of our residents, drive efficiencies, increasing our transparency and public accountability.
59. The previous strategies goals was around developing online service delivery and improving efficiency of service provision. As we become more developed in our approach to transformation we want to ensure that we are recording efficiency & cost savings on each new process that has been developed.
60. We will enhance our records management through data cleansing. Services will continuously update their information asset registers to maintain accurate data. This will ensure we comply with our data retention schedules.

Strand 3 - Make better use of data				
No.	What we will do	Who	Budget required	When
1	Continue to develop our approach to cyber security to ensure we remain safe from potential risks.	IT/All Services	TBC	Ongoing
2	Build on our digital dashboards to inform service delivery.	Digital/All Services	N/A	Ongoing
3	Use analytics on our social media channels to develop digital profiles of our customers.	Communications Team	N/A	Ongoing
4	Continually review and cleanse the data we collect and process for our core functions making sure it is used securely and ethically.	All Services	N/A	Ongoing
5	Ensure that we are recording efficiency & cost savings on each new process that has been developed.	All Services	N/A	Ongoing
6	Continue with the development of the borough profile to inform so we understand our residents and inform the best way to deliver services.	Policy	N/A	Ongoing
7	Update our census information when received.	Policy	N/A	22/23

Strand 4 - Give staff the tools and skills needed to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently

61. With Brexit capacity planning and the COVID-19 pandemic we were already strong in the area of mobile working in a traditional “office” sense with staff able to work from home. We can build on this so our workforce is able to deliver a truly mobile service to the customer, from all sites including when out in the borough carrying out their roles.
62. Council staff are equipped with work devices that are modern and reliable to help do their jobs with ease and efficiency. We need to continue to do this and work with staff to identify the best suited device for areas of work and where possible standardise these devices to reduce costs of support and ownership.
63. Improvements to the hardware and software for remote working during the very start of the pandemic now mean that staff have ability to work from anywhere (excluding jobs which have to be completed at specific locations / sites, such as parks and open spaces). There is reliable system access, sufficient bandwidth and telephony tools to give a similar work experience as if in the office.
64. These improvements mean that staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily both on the network as well as the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms.
65. Collaboration tools were a key aspect for the council to be able to mobilise so quickly at the beginning of the pandemic. We will continue our migration to cloud platforms for productivity and collaboration tools, to ensure staff can easily and seamlessly work together, share and store data efficiently and securely from any location.
66. Recognising the positive engagement we have had with our communities using hybrid tools as well as the efficiencies in a work context we will build a truly hybrid Microsoft Teams meeting environment for both internal and external council meetings. This will include a migration of telephony services across to the Microsoft Teams platform to enable better collaborative and flexible working, this will also aid the authority’s resilience/Business Continuity working practices.
67. For all organisations cyber security is a significant strategic risk that we have developed a strong approach to prevention and mitigation. As new risks emerge we will continue to build on our Cyber security awareness training program for both staff and councillors, to ensure that the organisation and its data are processed and stored securely, to protect against all known and evolving type of cyber threats.
68. The safety of our staff is paramount to us and we will continue to invest in technology for them to be able work safely whether that is via trackable devices or health and safety technology that monitors the impact of specific high-risk tools and equipment.
69. The council provides devices that are potentially used for remote working which could be lost or stolen and is therefore susceptible to cyber risks. To prevent this

from happening all council-owned devices will be deployed with an MDM (mobile device management) solution, to enable IT to manage and secure the devices should the above happen.

70. In December 2025 BT will shut off their Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) and Public Switch Telephone Network (PSTN) because neither of these technologies are capable of delivering the volume or quality of voice data needed in this increasingly digital world. Voice calls in the future will be made over the internet. With this in mind a telecommunication project will be created to identify all affected services, and new technologies to ensure a continuation of service.

Strand 4 - Give staff the tools and skills needed to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently

No.	What we will do	Who	Budget required	When
1	Ensure council staff are equipped with work devices that are both modern and reliable to help in carrying out their roles effectively.	IT	Within Service Budget	Ongoing
2	Continue to build the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms so that staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily.	IT/Communications Teams/HR	N/A	Ongoing
3	Continue our migration to cloud platforms for productivity and collaboration tools, to ensure staff can easily and seamlessly work together to share and store data.	IT	Within existing Budget	Ongoing
4	Continue to invest in appropriate H&S solutions and technology to aid and protect staff in carrying out their duties.	IT/Services	Within Service Budget	Ongoing
5	All council-owned devices that will be potentially used for remote working will be deployed with an MDM (mobile device management) solution, to enable IT to manage and secure the devices against loss, theft or cyber risks.	IT	Within existing budget	Ongoing
6	With the PSTN & ISDN switch off in 2025 a telecommunication project will be created to identify all affected services, and new technologies to ensure a continuation of service.	IT	Unknown at the moment	2023/2025

Strand 5 - Create an integrated digital infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other

71. As we move our services online to enable residents and staff to better access our systems and their data in a 24/7 digital world, we must give them the best tools, reliable platforms and systems that talk to each other. We will continue to maintain & continually evolve our systems to ensure that we are not left behind as Council.
72. We will need to ensure our internal and external network communications infrastructure is kept up to date and able to deliver robust and fast services for all of our residents and partners. This will also mean working with other public and private organisations to help influence the decisions and the infrastructure installed across the borough, to ensure the public and businesses of Ashford can obtain the fastest broadband services possible to help them access our services.
73. To support a hybrid working environment we will ensure our systems are accessible to staff, not just from an office environment, but whilst working flexibly. This may entail working with the other KPSN connected organisations to enable cross site working practices. This will be a reciprocal approach that supports other KPSN organisations to work flexibly too.
74. Since the last strategy, we have worked to start implementing corporate guidelines when procuring new systems. When systems are due for renewal we have looked to migrate systems to cloud based platforms and making sure that they are built on shared components and integrated through API's. This has provided business continuity resilience, improved access and freed up capacity in IT and within services. We will continue the cloud migration of services to either private or public cloud services, whichever is deemed appropriate and most cost effective. This will include a standard cloud hosting platform utilising the Microsoft Azure platform for services to use where they do not have specific service / business need to use specific cloud platforms.
75. Officers from the IT & Digital teams should be involved from the beginning of all IT hardware and software solution procurements to make sure they align with the corporate direction mentioned in the previous paragraph. We have centralised order processing and ongoing management of new systems to the corporate IT service. This will ensure that logs are kept of issues as well as achieving a better understanding of the total IT spend for the authority.
76. We will continue to support services to periodically review their line of business systems comparing to other products on the market. This will help to challenge and assist service areas in their adoption of a truly digitally transformational business model for their service.
77. Ensuring integration and interoperability are considered during the process of developing, upgrading or replacing internal systems, and procuring third party systems be they on premises or hosted, will enable a more efficient and seamless experience for the customer.
78. To support the Council's carbon reduction plans we will develop a full picture of the carbon footprint of our technology estate, to aid in reducing the footprint by

using initiatives such as leasing desktop devices which are re-utilised at end of lease, reducing server estate by moving to cloud platforms and using only accredited WEEE certified disposal companies.

79. As we develop systems that talk to each other it is essential that we continue to keep our networks safe and build on our approach to cyber security, ensuring all solutions are procured and configured with this as a priority.

80. Currently there is a significant investment across the KPSN in technologies to support the Internet of Things (IoT). As the borough's connectivity improves we will look to utilise IoT technology to help achieve more efficient services and to support the increased use of mobile technologies to deliver services and aid staff and stakeholders in delivering digital services.

Strand 5 - Create an integrated digital infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other

No.	What we will do	Who	Budget required	When
1	Make our systems accessible to staff from any location maintaining and continuously evolving them.	IT	Within Service Budget	Ongoing
2	Develop a clear vision and design for all of the councils IT systems	IT	N/A	2022/25
4	Continue cloud migration of services to either private or public cloud services	IT	Full costs unknown at present	Ongoing
5	Centralise ordering processing and management of new software to Corporate IT Service	IT	N/A	2022/25
6	Develop a process for identifying and implementing integration and interoperability opportunities for new and existing systems, to include all major back-office and legacy systems.	IT/Digital Team	N/A	2022/25
7	Develop a full picture of the carbon footprint of our technology estate	IT	N/A	2023/25
8	Review all major back-office and legacy systems to highlight suitability	IT	N/A	2022/25

Equalities Impact Assessment

81. Members are referred to the attached Assessment. The key areas highlighted are that we need to ensure that as business processes are redesigned and as the website evolves we take into account the diverse nature of our residents. The accessibility guidelines are a main focus of our website design and we need to use customer profiles that represent people with different characteristics to form the basis of service redesign to ensure we meet the needs of all those in our community.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

82. An internal and external consultation has been undertaken and a review of the results is included in the equalities impact assessment. In addition the strategy has been developed using key members of staff that form the digital core group.

83. The IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee have considered this strategy and recommend to Cabinet that this strategy be adopted.

Other Options Considered

84. We can continue to work as we are but without the direction this strategy could mean that we don't move forward digitally and fail to meet customer and staff expectations.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

85. Our residents expect that they should be able to transact with us online, as they can elsewhere, however there are residents that cannot or will not transact online and we need have resources available to help them. This strategy will help us achieve both goals. There is risk of reputational damage if we are not able to keep up with customer expectations.

Next Steps in Process

86. Cabinet are asked to approve and adopt this strategy, its delivery will then be reported through Pentana and it is recommended that this is monitored by the IT & Digital Advisory Committee.

Conclusion

87. The work that has been done to deliver the previous strategy has raised the expectations of residents due be able to give them access to services at a time and place that is convenient to them. This strategy will enable us to continue to not only keep up with these expectations but ensure we are there for those that can't transact online via traditional methods.

88. This strategy also aims to support our staff in being able to work remotely using the tools that they trust to be efficient in their roles, giving the best service they can to our residents.

Portfolio Holder's & Chair of IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee Views

89. Cllr Alan Pickering – Portfolio Holder for HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation

“As anticipated the way that our residents want to communicate with us has significantly changed over the past 4 years as we as a Council have worked to deliver quick and easy to use digital services. This work has delivered significant benefit to the tax payer enabling the organisation to work effectively and deliver the efficiency savings mentioned in the report.

Some residents will not have the skills to use digital methods to deal with us, consequently, we shall continue to maintain our face to face and telephone systems to help our residents to continue to receive a good quality service.

Officers have researched the direction of the strategy using information such as our resident's online behaviour and rightly combined the IT, Digital & Customer Service department's strategies as they are closely linked on the services they deliver. The 5 strands give the focus to able to deliver the strategy and we will continue to build on the blocks that have already been put in place over the past 4 years and continue to provide valuable, easy to use services.”

90. Cllr Neil Shorter – Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT

“This document sets out our strategy going forward but reflects on and continues the journey that ABC has been on for many years. This strategy will ensure that the service continues to provide secure systems and the quality of service that residents and staff deserve.

The one specific point to note by individual services is that the IT teams must be engaged at the earliest opportunity when new systems and requirements are identified so that any new system dovetails into the structure that is being delivered by this strategy. This will ensure that we continue to deliver a holistic structure that can be maintained in a cost effective and efficient manner.”

91. Cllr Matthew Forest – Chair of IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee:

“The IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee fully support this strategy and will have a key role in monitoring the implementation moving forward.

The delivery of the IT, Digital & Customer Service strategy is a really important activity for the Council not only for our residents but our staff alike. It is great to see the focus on using our data in an ethical and responsible way so that residents have trust and confidence in how we handle their data and also an opportunity to engage with our residents to see how they want digital services delivered.”

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Equality Impact Assessment

1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is a document that summarises how the council has had due regard to the public sector equality duty (Equality Act 2010) in its decision-making. Although there is no legal duty to produce an EIA, the Council must have **due regard** to the equality duty and an EIA is recognised as the best method of fulfilling that duty. It can assist the Council in making a judgment as to whether a policy or other decision will have unintended negative consequences for certain people and help maximise the positive impacts of policy change. An EIA can lead to one of four consequences:

- (a) No major change – the policy or other decision is robust with no potential for discrimination or adverse impact. Opportunities to promote equality have been taken;
- (b) Adjust the policy or decision to remove barriers or better promote equality as identified in the EIA;
- (c) Continue the policy – if the EIA identifies potential for adverse impact, set out compelling justification for continuing;
- (d) Stop and remove the policy where actual or potential unlawful discrimination is identified.

Public sector equality duty

2. The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on the council, when exercising public functions, to have due regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation;

- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

- (c) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it (ie tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups).

3. These are known as the three aims of the general equality duty.

Protected characteristics

4. The Equality Act 2010 sets out nine protected characteristics for the purpose of the equality duty:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership*
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

*For marriage and civil partnership, only the first aim of the duty applies in relation to employment.

Due regard

5. Having 'due regard' is about using good equality information and analysis at the right time as part of decision-making procedures.

6. To 'have due regard' means that in making decisions and in its other day-to-day activities the council must consciously consider the need to do the things set out in the general equality duty: eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. This can involve:

- removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
- taking steps to meet the needs of people with certain protected characteristics when these are different from the needs of other people.
- encouraging people with certain protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where it is disproportionately low.

7. How much regard is 'due' will depend on the circumstances. The greater the potential impact, the higher the regard required by the duty. Examples of functions and decisions likely to engage the duty include: policy decisions, budget decisions, public appointments, service provision, statutory discretion, decisions on individuals, employing staff and procurement of goods and services.

8. In terms of timing:

- Having 'due regard' should be considered at the inception of any decision or proposed policy or service development or change.
- Due regard should be considered throughout development of a decision. Notes shall be taken and kept on file as to how due regard has been had to

the equality duty in research, meetings, project teams, consultations etc.

- The completion of the EIA is a way of effectively summarising this and it should inform final decision-making.

Armed Forces Community

9. As part of the council's commitment to the Armed Forces Community made through the signing of the Armed Forces Covenant the council's Cabinet agreed in November 2017 that potential impacts on the Armed Forces Community should be considered as part of the Equality Impact Assessment process.

10. Accordingly, due regard should also be had throughout the decision making process to potential impacts on the groups covered by the Armed Forces Covenant:

- Current serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
- Former serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
- The families of current and former Armed Forces personnel.

Case law principles

11. A number of principles have been established by the courts in relation to the equality duty and due regard:

- Decision-makers in public authorities must be aware of their duty to have 'due regard' to the equality duty and so EIA's must be attached to any relevant committee reports.
- Due regard is fulfilled before and at the time a particular policy is under consideration as well as at the time a

decision is taken. Due regard involves a conscious approach and state of mind.

- A public authority cannot satisfy the duty by justifying a decision after it has been taken.
- The duty must be exercised in substance, with rigour and with an open mind in such a way that it influences the final decision.
- The duty is a non-delegable one. The duty will always remain the responsibility of the public authority.
- The duty is a continuing one so that it needs to be considered not only when a policy, for example, is being developed and agreed but also when it is implemented.
- It is good practice for those exercising public functions to keep an accurate record showing that they have actually considered the general duty and pondered relevant questions. Proper record keeping encourages transparency and will discipline those carrying out the relevant function to undertake the duty conscientiously.
- A public authority will need to consider whether it has sufficient information to assess the effects of the policy, or the way a function is being carried out, on the aims set out in the general equality duty.
- A public authority cannot avoid complying with the duty by claiming that it does not have enough resources to do so.

follow this when developing or reporting on proposals for policy or service development or change and other decisions likely to engage the equality duty. [Equality Duty in decision-making](#)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced helpful guidance on “Meeting the Equality Duty in Policy and Decision-Making” (October 2014). It is available on the following link and report authors should read and

Lead officer:	Ben Robinson/Michelle Pecci
Decision maker:	Cabinet
Decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy, project, service, contract • Review, change, new, stop 	To adopt the Customer Service, IT & Digital Strategy and associated actions plans that aim to improve the level of service provision, the way officers work and business processes that are delivered by digital means.
Date of decision: The date when the final decision is made. The EIA must be complete before this point and inform the final decision.	
Summary of the proposed decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims and objectives • Key actions • Expected outcomes • Who will be affected and how? • How many people will be affected? 	<p>The aim of this strategy is to put technology at the forefront of our journey to put the customer at the centre of the services we provide. Developing and inspiring confidence in our digital services making them accessible to all and enabling us to deliver outstanding customer services.</p> <p>Key actions are to Improve online services to enable our customer service team to focus on supporting the digitally excluded and particularly vulnerable residents building any new digital services with the customer at the centre focusing on quick and easy transactions that gives a good customer experience.</p> <p>We will work with partners on projects to help develop skills and trust and continually review the data we process for our core functions</p> <p>To make our systems accessible to staff wherever they need to access them and ensuring all residents are able to access digital services whenever they want to use them.</p>
Information and research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline the information and research that has informed the decision. • Include sources and key findings. 	This strategy has been informed by review of good practice across the public and private sector and key information has been sought from the Government Digital Service, one of the leading governmental digital service providers in the world.
Consultation:	Consultations were held with both staff and residents. The customer consultation was held via

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific consultation has occurred on this decision? • What were the results of the consultation? • Did the consultation analysis reveal any difference in views across the protected characteristics? • What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis on how the decision will affect people with different protected characteristics? 	<p>the consultation portal and received 34 responses.</p> <p>The responses came from a range of age groups: 25-34 (12%), 35-44 (21%), 45-54 (12%), 55-64 (24%) and 65 and over (30%).</p> <p>The majority of our respondents were already digitally active, with 97% having access to the internet and 70% already contacting the council via our website.</p> <p>The public respondents generally felt the website is easy to use, with 71% rating the website 6 (or higher) out of 10 for its ease of use.</p> <p>8.7% of respondents had disabilities that were barriers to them transacting using digital tools.</p> <p>Over 90% of respondents said they would like to view all of their council transactions in one place online.</p> <p>The internal consultation was carried out via survey monkey and yielded 42 responses.</p> <p>71% of staff said they feel they have access to the hardware/digital equipment/software required to complete their job to the best of their ability, whilst 78% felt that their digital skills and training were adequate.</p>
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Assess the relevance of the decision to people with different protected characteristics and assess the impact of the decision on people with different protected characteristics.

When assessing relevance and impact, make it clear who the assessment applies to

within the protected characteristic category. For example, a decision may have high relevance for young people but low relevance for older people; it may have a positive impact on women but a neutral impact on men.

Protected characteristic	Relevance to Decision High/Medium/Low/None	Impact of Decision Positive (Major/Minor) Negative (Major/Minor) Neutral
<u>AGE</u> Elderly	Medium	Negative: Some Elderly residents may not have access, skills or motivation to access services on line.
Middle age	Medium	Neutral: Some middle age residents may not have access, skills or motivation to access services on line
Young adult	Medium	Positive: Young Adults expect to be able to access services on line
Children	None	
<u>DISABILITY</u> Physical	Medium	Positive: Digital service provision can be a positive step for many with disabilities, we will need to continue to ensure our accessibility tools are suitable for a range of disabilities.
Mental	Medium	
Sensory	Medium	
<u>GENDER RE-ASSIGNMENT</u>	None	
<u>MARRIAGE/CIVIL PARTNERSHIP</u>	None	
<u>PREGNANCY/MATERNITY</u>	None	
<u>RACE</u>	None	

<u>RELIGION OR BELIEF</u>	None	
<u>SEX</u>	None	
Men		
Women	None	
<u>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</u>	None	
<u>ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY</u>	None	
Regular/Reserve personnel		
Former service personnel	None	
Service families	None	

<p>Mitigating negative impact:</p> <p>Where any negative impact has been identified, outline the measures taken to mitigate against it.</p>	<p>There is no intention to remove face to face or telephone customer service. The time saved by staff due to reduced demand and more efficient processes will support a better level of service to those who cannot, or do not wish to, access services on line.</p>
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<p>Is the decision relevant to the aims of the equality duty?</p> <p>Guidance on the aims can be found in the EHRC's Essential Guide, alongside fuller PSED Technical Guidance.</p>	
Aim	Yes / No / N/A
1) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation	N/A
2) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	N/A
3) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	N/A

<p>Conclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how due regard has been had to the equality duty, from start to finish. • There should be no unlawful discrimination arising from the decision (see guidance above). • Advise on whether the proposal meets the aims of the equality duty or whether adjustments have been made or need to be made or whether any residual impacts are justified. • How will monitoring of the policy, procedure or decision and its implementation be undertaken and reported? 	<p>The fundamental basis of this strategy is that no-one is left behind. We will not be removing face to face or telephone customer service and this project is about improving choice of access to services for our residents.</p> <p>A significant strand of this strategy is improving digital skills and inclusion. The Digital inclusion theme runs throughout the project. Digital exclusion can be caused by a number of challenges but from an EIA point of view usually due to disability or age (lack of skills). We will be making provision to ensure that disabled and low skilled residents are supported either through accessibility tools or through traditional methods of contact with the council.</p> <p>It is not recommended that any adjustments need to be made other than ensuring the principles of equality duty and accessibility to services are applied when designing service provision and the website.</p> <p>Management team and the IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee will monitor delivery of this strategy.</p> <p>Particular resident's feedback will be considered through the web & customer services teams to ensure that negative impacts are identified swiftly and rectified where necessary.</p>
<p>EIA completion date:</p>	<p>24th February 2022</p>



Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy 2022

Introduction



This Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy sets out our vision for putting technology at the forefront of our journey to put the residents and local businesses at the centre of the services we provide. It explains how we will develop and inspire confidence in our digital services whilst making them accessible to all. This is how we plan to deliver outstanding customer services.

We want Ashford to be a thriving, productive and inclusive borough by 2030 and beyond; a vital part of Kent and the South East where local businesses, social enterprises, communities and the public sector provide collective leadership to promote shared prosperity, happiness and wellbeing.

We will be supporting our staff to be ambitious, creative and trustworthy in all that they do to fulfil the council's ambition to be an effective and well-resourced organisation that will:

1 Treat everyone fairly and with respect.

2 Understand and respond to the needs of our communities to ensure no one is disadvantaged.

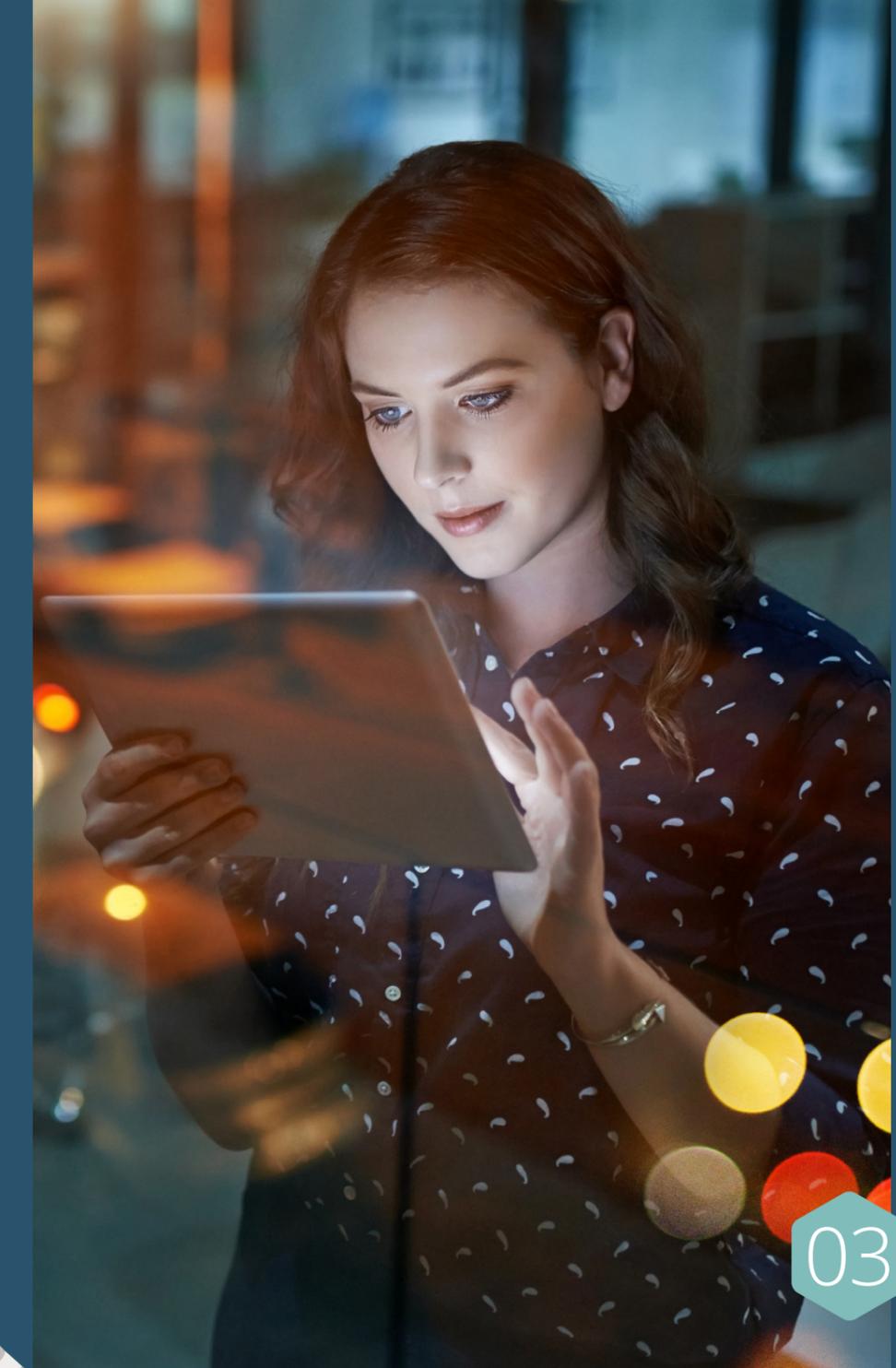
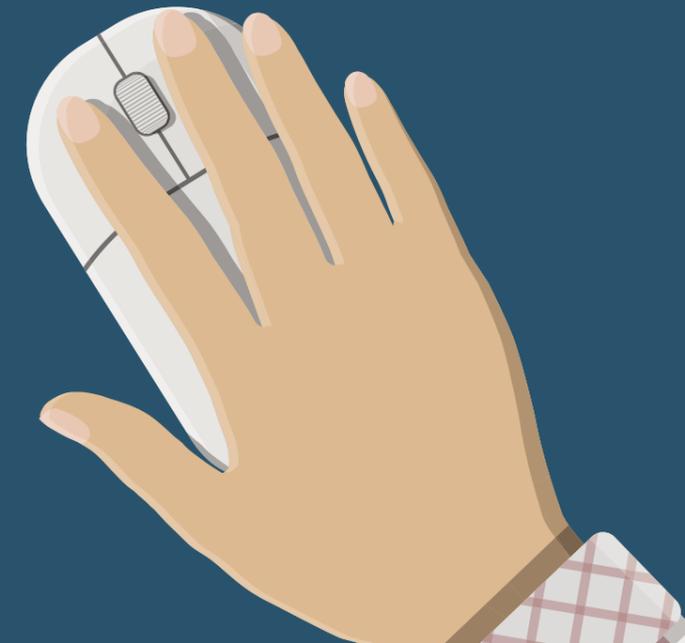
3 Put the customer at the heart of everything we do and ensure our services are accessible.

4 Make the most of our assets and invest wisely to ensure we live within our means.

5 All work towards achieving the objectives of being a Green Pioneer and Caring Ashford.

These principles are set out in our corporate plan and this strategy builds on that plan.

COVID-19 has been a major disruptor that forced the whole organisation to change its approach to service delivery as well as making people change the way that they transact with us. More people are accessing our services online so we need to make sure that our processes are simple, easy-to-use and have the resident at the heart. To do this we will continue to redesign our services by embracing digital tools that enhance the customer experience. This will allow us to make sure we have the resources to help those who cannot use digital tools and need additional support.



What we aim to achieve



The main aims of this strategy are to:

Redesign our processes to put the resident first and to provide a better experience when interacting with the council. We want to improve the choice of ways our residents can contact us. People will be able to get what they need from us in a simple and easy-to-use way.

Work with partners across all sectors to bridge the digital skills gap and provide alternatives to those residents that cannot transact with us online. We will focus on areas where digital poverty acts as a barrier for residents. Work with national and local partners on cross functional projects to reach more residents and strengthen the technology we use and services that we provide.

Develop a better understanding of our residents and businesses, using joined-up data that will allow us to better design services around the needs of them. These new services will drive efficiencies and digital transformation, increasing our transparency and public accountability. This will support us in making better decisions for our residents.

Have a happy and more efficient workforce who are equipped with all the technology they need to do their jobs safely and efficiently. Some of the work that they currently do will be delivered digitally which will mean they are able to focus on higher-value tasks.

Create modern, secure and integrated solutions infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other. This will simplify things for residents and ensure that staff are able to see the relevant information that they need.



How will we achieve this?

We want to use the most suitable technology to provide easy-to-use digital services that will improve the service to all of our residents no matter how they want to transact with us. We will achieve this through five strands of work:



Our approach



We will use our digital design principles to guide all of our work to deliver the Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy strands – these are:

Do the hard work, test and learn to keep it simple

We need to regularly review our process – just because we have done it for years doesn't mean it's the best way. Working in an agile way where feedback on processes is actioned. Customers should have a single point of contact. It's ok to make mistakes, as long as we learn from them and share our experiences.

Focus on the customer journey, making it quick and uncomplicated to empower customers to do more for themselves

We need to use data to inform the construction of the customer journey. Aligns with corporate values of Ambitious, Trustworthy and Creative. We must balance our digital persona with also being seen as human beings.

Focus on the goals and delivery

We need to know the purpose of what we're hoping to achieve. There should be a clear path of how we will do this set out at the start of a project.

Less is more

We need to work efficiently and smartly. Less is more. If something works we should look to reuse it elsewhere in the organisation.

Seamless approach

We will put the customer at the heart of what we do. We'll provide easy to use digital services that collect information only once. We need to be consistent across council systems to provide resilience.

Distinctive

We should be seen by others as trailblazing and distinctive developing new and innovative services using open source so that we can share. Thinking outside of the box and be risk aware, not risk averse. Ask yourself: "How can you make this process more distinctive as an ABC service?" We should dare to innovate, whether that is using new ways of working or existing solutions.

Who needs this information?

When designing content or a process we should always be asking ourselves this question. We need to have an understanding of the customer's needs and should only collect the information we need. This information should only be collected once, at the first point of contact.

Tell customers what to expect and keep them up to date along the way

We must manage the expectations of our customers. They should be able to track the progress of their transactions/applications. We need to clearly communicate when they can expect to hear back from us and what else we may need. We should constantly seek feedback from our customers to continually improve services.

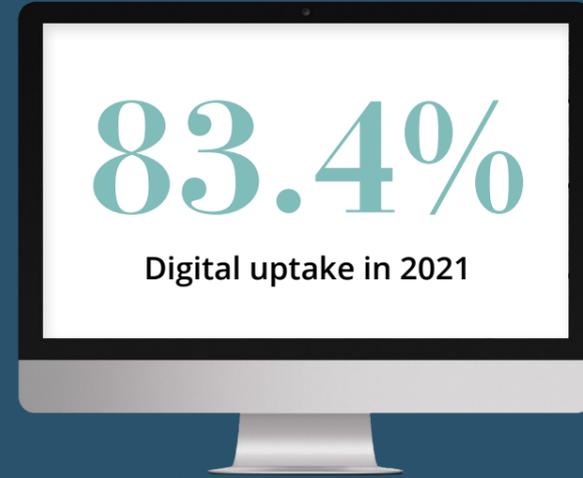
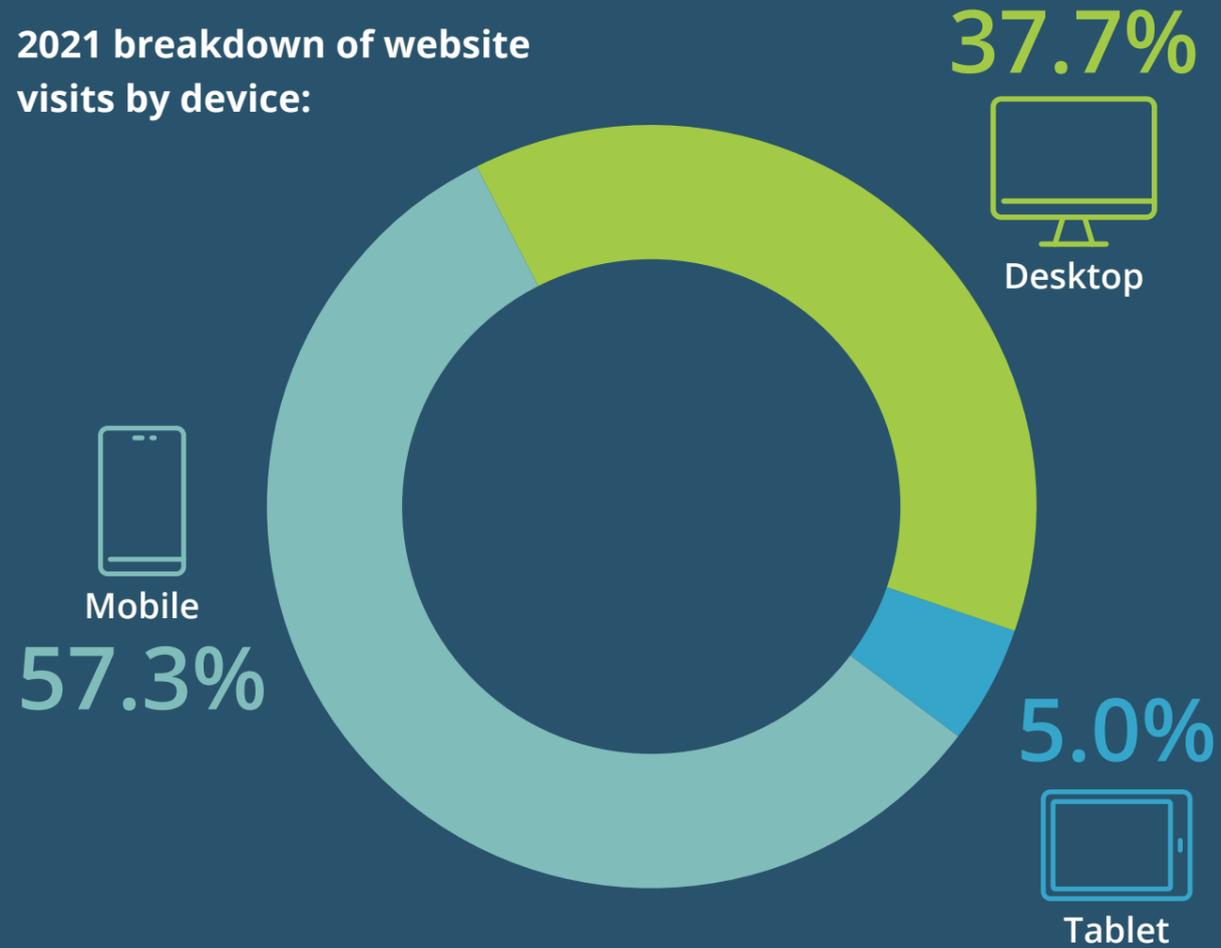
This is for everyone

Consider the ability of those using our services and create content/processes that can be completed by anyone. Ensure services and customer journeys are accessible. Write in plain English, use heading styles, explain acronyms, use alt text and cater for users who have English as a second language.

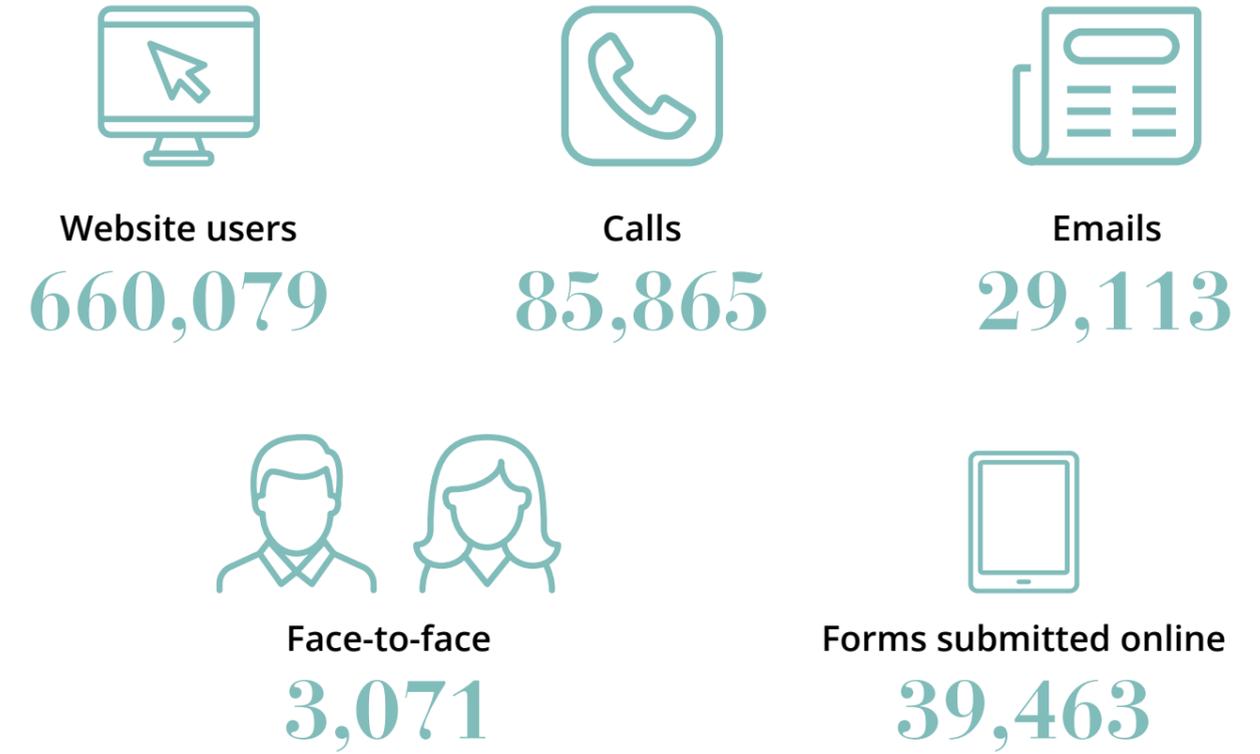
Key Statistics



2021 breakdown of website visits by device:



Breakdown of 2021 customer service contacts:



Strand 1 – Residents and local businesses first



More people are going online to access services and the residents of Ashford are no different to the wider population. Our residents and local businesses are our customers and they expect easy and simple-to-use services that are available online and on any device that they use. Our residents visit our website across a range of devices. In 2021 57.3% of users accessed council services via a mobile device, 37.7% via a desktop computer and 5% used a tablet.

We have a variety of online services available for people to self-serve 24/7. These range from quite simple contact forms through to complex end-to-end services like reporting a missed bin that automate as much as possible to provide a seamless and quicker resolution for our residents.

At Ashford Borough Council, we want to ensure that our residents are at the forefront of everything we do. Our residents want to be able to report, apply and pay easily and be able to track what they have reported to the resolution of the process, receiving updates along the way, and we need to be able to facilitate this for them.

www.ashford.gov.uk is a trusted source of information and we need to ensure our residents trust our online presence, relying on consistent design and content to know they are interacting with us – and only us – whether that be via our website or social media channels. We will also share any known scams via our social media channels. We will work to use trusted systems and sources such as .Gov products such as Notify & Verify to help to build confidence in our online services.

What we will do

- Build a customer portal that gives residents information all in one place.
- Improve online services to enable our services to focus on supporting the digitally excluded and particularly vulnerable residents.
- Carry out user research and receive continuous feedback from residents to understand what they need from us. Create a roadmap and continue to make sure our website is clear and easy-to-use.
- Build any new digital services with the resident at the centre focusing on quick and easy transactions that provide a good customer experience.
- Enhance our channels for customer services, increasing chat and investigating platforms such as WhatsApp and .Gov notify.
- Use data analytics to identify trends/failed search terms and optimise our website content by improving keywords, page titles and descriptions and ensuring that the design and content is consistent.
- Utilise social media and emerging communications channels (such as Nextdoor) to reach out to the community and engage with them on the channels they choose to communicate with us on.



Strand 2 – Collaborate with partner groups to improve digital skills and inclusion



Digital platforms are generally the default option for accessing public services, information, entertainment and each other. Those who are offline, and not capable of using the internet, risk missing the benefits that the internet can offer.

Digital inclusion is about making sure that people have the capability to use the internet to do things that benefit them day-to-day – whether they are individuals or businesses.

Most people will need to interact with a digital system in their lives, such as an online job application, even if they don't have the skills to do so. Digitally excluded people can lack skills, confidence, and motivation, along with having limited or no access to equipment and connectivity.

At Ashford Borough Council we want to do what we can to help prevent so many people being digitally excluded. Being able to help our residents is key to everything we do, where they can't access our services online we offer assisted digital help and telephone appointments.

With around a quarter of the UK population having some type of disability, digital accessibility is a key focus on our website development roadmap as we do not want to exclude any of our users. Regular monitoring of our website's accessibility is ensuring that we remain compliant with this important regulation.

COVID-19 highlighted the part that technology plays in the community, particularly engagement. Using hybrid meeting technology to encourage greater engagement with our communities enabled more of our residents to participate in local democracy; and whilst the government has not agreed that hybrid meetings can form part of the formal machinery of local democracy we will continue to develop our approach in order to take advantage of wider engagement and make improvements to our carbon footprint.

Superfast broadband and mobile coverage are part of the essential digital infrastructure needed by residents and businesses especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. We will continue to pro-actively support the rollout of superfast broadband and improvements to mobile coverage across the borough.

What we will do

- Feasibility study around Community Wi-Fi projects.
- Work with KCC and partners on projects to help develop skills and trust.
- Use our social media to highlight scams, good practice and credible sources of information.
- Proactively monitor and take action to ensure our website continues to have good accessibility standards.
- Continue to work with broadband providers to support improved connections and increase investment.
- Continue the coordination of the Ashford urban area Fibre To The Premises rollout and ensure other planned rollouts are continuing at pace.
- Take a leading role in coordinating and promoting programmes such as the Gigabit voucher schemes and community fibre partnerships.
- Proactively engage with Mobile Network Operators and Mobile UK to progress the Shared Rural Network and improve mobile connectivity in the borough.



Strand 3 – Make better use of data

Data is a key asset enabling us, as a council, to deliver improving services that are innovative, targeted, and impactful to our residents. These will be designed and delivered around our data assets, transforming our services, improving outcomes and driving efficiencies.

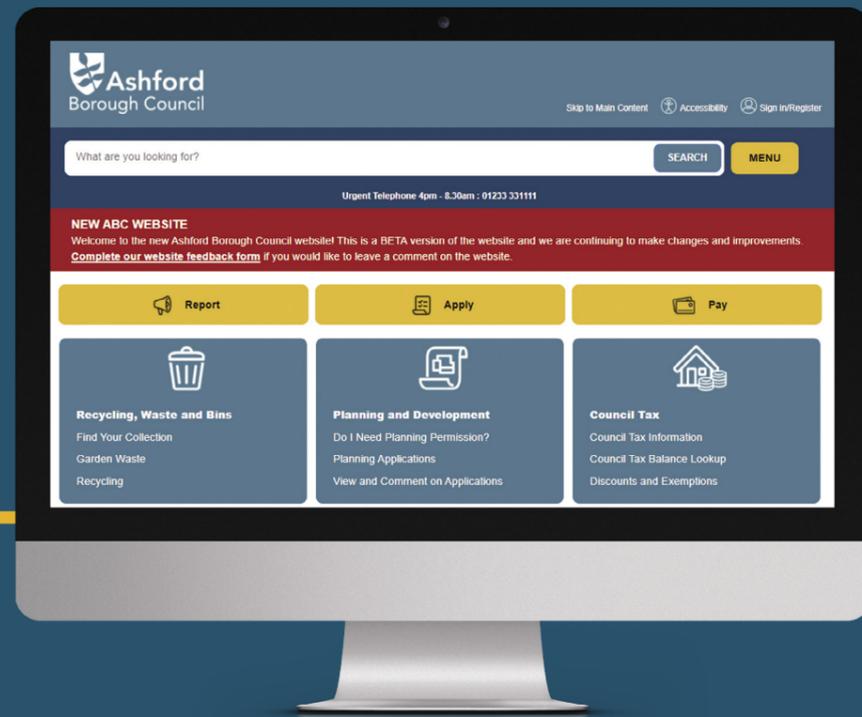
The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the innovative use of data, with a range of data-driven interventions launched or repurposed during the pandemic, providing invaluable assistance to our residents at a time when they needed it most. Whilst the vital public interest, legal basis for processing has now passed, we must not lose sight of the power that deploying our existing datasets in differing ways had in furthering and increasingly tailoring our services to the needs of our customers.

Information and data are crucial to every part of the council's business. Managing and using it correctly, making sure it's secure and making it available helps us to identify areas to focus on to deliver improved services.

We also monitor search terms so we can ensure our visitors can find what they are looking for no matter how they search for it as well as enabling us to communicate with our residents using the same terms that they are accustomed to using. Also, by reviewing our website visits and call centre data we can predict times of the year when we expect to be even busier, allowing us to put measures in place to deal with increased demand.

What we will do

- Continue to develop our approach to cyber security.
- Build on our digital dashboards to inform service delivery.
- Continually review and cleanse the data we collect and process for our core functions making sure it is used securely and ethically.
- Develop a borough profile so we understand our residents better and inform the best way to deliver services.
- Use analytics on our social media channels to develop digital profiles of our customers.



Strand 4 – Give staff the tools and skills needed to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently

Council staff are equipped with work devices that are modern and reliable to help them to do their jobs with ease and efficiency. We need to continue to do this and work with employees to identify the best suited device for respective areas of work. Where possible, we will standardise these devices.

Council staff to have the ability to work from anywhere (excluding jobs which have to be completed at specific locations/sites, such as parks and open spaces), with reliable system access, sufficient bandwidth and telephony service where supplied to give a similar work experience as if in the office.

Staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily on the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms.

The safety of our staff is paramount to us and we will invest in technology for them to be able to work safely whether that is via trackable devices or health and safety technology that monitors the impact of specific high-risk tools and equipment.

Voice calls in the future will be made over the internet. With this in mind we will identify how this might affect our services, and invest in new technologies to ensure a continuation of service.

What we will do

- Ensure council staff are equipped with modern and reliable work devices.
- Ensure that council staff have the ability to work from anywhere.
- Continue to develop the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms so that staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily.
- Continue our migration to cloud platforms, where appropriate, for productivity and collaboration tools.
- Invest in health and safety technology to enable staff to work safely.



Strand 5 – Create an integrated digital infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other

As we move our services online to enable residents and staff to better access our systems and their data in a 24/7 digital world, we must give them the best tools, reliable platforms and systems that talk to each other.

We will need to ensure our internal and external network communications infrastructure is kept up to date and able to deliver robust and fast services for all of our residents and partners. This will also mean working with other public and private sector organisations to help influence the decisions and the infrastructure that is installed across the borough. This will help ensure the residents and businesses of Ashford can obtain the fastest broadband services possible to help them access our services.

Develop a clear vision and design for all of the council's IT systems, to consolidate them to a set of specialist systems built on shared components and platforms, integrated through APIs, and using cloud services (Software as a Service & Platform as a Service) where possible.

What we will do

- Make our systems accessible to staff wherever they need to access them.
- Develop a clear vision and design for all of the council's IT systems.
- Continue cloud migration of services to either private or public cloud services.
- Centralise ordering processing and management of new software to Corporate IT Service.
- Develop a process for identifying and implementing integration and interoperability opportunities for new and existing systems.
- Develop a full picture of the carbon footprint of our technology estate.
- Review all major back-office and legacy systems to highlight suitability.



